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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000766

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, H/FO
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINR ASEC UNSC EAIR SA IR LE
SUBJECT: LEBANON: PARLIAMENT ELECTS MICHEL SLEIMAN AS
PRESIDENT

REF: BEIRUT 733

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) After 19 previous sessions were canceled, the Lebanese Parliament finally succeeded in electing former Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president, ending the presidential vacuum that had gripped Lebanon for the past six months. In what many viewed as a stronger than expected acceptance speech, President Sleiman emphasized Lebanon's commitment to UNSC Resolutions and the Special Tribunal. While commanding Hizballah's efforts in resisting Israeli aggression, he argued that a new defensive strategy is needed for Lebanon, and concluded with a call for unity and national reconciliation.

¶2. (C) The election, the first step in the Arab League-mediated deal reached in Doha on May 21 (reftel), was greeted with fireworks and fanfare throughout the country as Lebanese celebrated what they hoped would be an end to the continuing political instability and violence of the past three years. After moving into the Baabda presidential palace on May 26, Sleiman will begin consultations with parliamentary blocs on May 27 to determine who will be the next prime minister. End summary.

AT LONG LAST, PARLIAMENT
ELECTS A PRESIDENT ...

¶3. (C) Parliament elected former Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman on May 25 with a total of 118 out of 127 votes cast in a secret ballot that took less than eight minutes. Of the remaining nine ballots, six were cast as blank "white votes," one was cast for former minister Jean Obeid, another for former MP and previous March 14 presidential candidate Nassib Lahoud, and one ballot for assassinated former PM Rafik Hariri and all other martyred MPs. Future Movement MP Bassem Sabaa later claimed credit for the latter, while independent Tripoli MP Mosbah Ahdab was rumored to have voted for Nassib Lahoud.

...BUT NOT WITHOUT DISSENT

¶4. (C) Speculation abounded that Aoun bloc MPs had cast the

white votes in an attempt to discredit Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces, who had threatened to abstain due to concerns that constitutional procedures required to elect a standing senior government official had not been heeded. Others attributed the white votes to March 14 MPs Nayla Mouwad and Boutros Harb, who, along with former Speaker and current MP Hussein Husseini, voiced their objections prior to the vote count to proceeding with the election without addressing the constitutional issue. Speaker Nabih Berri quickly put an end to the dissent, stating he would note their reservations.

¶15. (C) Lebanese Forces MP George Adwan also conveyed his bloc's reservations on the electoral law agreed at Doha; however, Adwan said Lebanese Forces supported Sleiman's election. (Note: At Doha leaders agreed to revert to the 1960 law, based on small "qada" districts, as a starting point for electoral reform. Lebanese Forces had advocated even smaller districts, which would increase their Christian support. End note.)

¶16. (C) Opposition MPs, who have protested the legitimacy of the Siniora government since the 2006 resignation of six opposition cabinet members (including all five Shia members) did not join the rest of parliament in standing and warmly applauding the entrance of PM Fouad Siniora and his cabinet. Speaker Berri, an opposition stalwart, earlier had announced a postponement in a scheduled separate parliamentary session called to amend the electoral law to avoid having the Siniora government in attendance, deferring the debate until a new cabinet is formed. (Comment: Now caretaker Justice Minister

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Charles Rizk told the Charge later that evening that Berri took this decision because he did not want Siniora's cabinet involved. Sidon Chamber of Commerce head Mohammad Zaatari, however, told Charge the following day that this was a mistake, as it would burden the new cabinet with this issue. End comment.)

BERRI CRITICIZES U.S.
NEW MIDDLE EAST PROJECT

¶17. (C) Flanked by the Speaker, cabinet members, and Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifah al-Thani, PM and FM Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim, and Arab League SYG Amr Moussa, President Sleiman took the oath of office, putting an end to the sixth month vacancy. Speaker Berri then took the floor, noting in his remarks that two issues remained on the agenda of the National Dialogue begun in Qatar (reftel): forming a new cabinet and agreeing on a new electoral law. Berri also noted Sleiman's responsibility, according to the Doha agreement, to conduct a dialogue on the relationship between the state and its defensive apparatus. Berri thanked several European and Arab countries, and the Arab League, for helping to resolve the political crisis. He then expressed sarcastic thanks to the U.S. for becoming "aware that Lebanon is not the suitable place for the birth of its Broader Middle East project, which in our opinion will never find a suitable place for labor pain and birth in the Middle East."

SLEIMAN CALLS FOR
"PLURALISM AND COMMITMENT"
TO BUILD LEBANON

¶18. (C) Beginning his inaugural address with a moment of silence in honor of all the "Lebanese martyrs," Sleiman called for "all political forces and citizens to build a Lebanon we all agree on, setting the interests of Lebanon above our individual interests," and called for unity and solid reconciliation. He underlined the need to preserve Lebanon's pluralism and reiterated his commitment to the principles of the Taif Accord. Sleiman declared, "If it is important that the electoral law provide a just

representation of the people, it is even more important, then, that the results of the elections be accepted." He also acknowledged Lebanese compatriots who live abroad, stating that the Lebanese diaspora had the right to Lebanese citizenship, and, "We must acknowledge the rights of the Lebanese abroad."

SLEIMAN REAFFIRMS SUPPORT FOR
UN RESOLUTIONS AND TRIBUNAL,
CALLS FOR DEFENSIVE STRATEGY

¶9. (C) Sleiman also reaffirmed his commitment and respect for all UNSC resolutions, as well as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon for the "martyr Rafik Hariri and all our martyrs." He further stated that "the continuation of Israeli aggression necessitated the creation of a defense strategy which allows us to make use of the resistance's experience." Sleiman praised the bravery of Hizballah's fighters and the grandeur of its martyrs who succeeded in forcing the occupiers out of Lebanon. He called for "brotherly relations" between Lebanon and Syria, with mutual respect for sovereignty by each country. The speech met with widespread applause, with the notable exception of Syrian FM Moallem, who, seated two rows in front of the Charge and Rep. Rahall, did not applaud Sleiman's remarks on either the Tribunal or relationship with Syria.

¶10. (C) Most of our interlocutors deemed Sleiman's speech, which they believed he drafted himself, as "unexpectedly" strong. One contact said Sleiman had been overheard to say "they won't be expecting this" just moments before entering the plenary. Caretaker FM Tareq Mitri noted as significant Sleiman's references to the "resistance" in the past tense, as assessment shared by Justice Minister Rizk and UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan, who believed it was a deliberate nuance that merited attention. Seated at dinner with the Charge and Pol/Econ Chief, Internal Security Forces

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(ISF) General Ashraf Rifi, Surete Generale head Wafiq Jezzini and Lebanese Armed Forces G-2 (military intelligence) Director BG Georges Khoury expressed surprise that Sleiman's remarks had been as hard-hitting as they were. All three believed he had drafted the text himself.

¶11. (C) Rizk (conveying plans to return to private business, but admitting he would not refuse a cabinet seat) also was pleased that Sleiman had emphasized the independence of the judiciary, which has been the target of efforts to prevent the Special Tribunal from moving forward. He also appreciated Sleiman's stance on the rightful role of the Lebanese diaspora, which he wished "to engage in a way that will make them feel like actual citizens." Rizk reported that he is working on an initiative to grant nationality to overseas Lebanese and give them voting rights, although he believes this plan will not be in place in time for the Spring 2008 parliamentary elections.

QATARI EMIR DISMISSES
"NO WINNER NO LOSER" SLOGAN

¶12. (C) In an unprecedented move during a presidential election session, Qatari Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifah al-Thani delivered a speech following Sleiman's swearing-in, in which he dismissed the common slogan of "no winner and no loser" in Lebanon's political rift, stating instead that "Lebanon was the winner and strife was the loser."

FOREIGN DIGNITARIES
WITNESS THE EVENT

¶13. (C) Other foreign dignitaries also were in attendance, including French FM Bernard Kouchner, Italian FM Franco

Frattini, Spanish FM Miguel Moratinos, EU High Representative Javier Solana, Iranian FM Manouchehr Mottaki, Saudi Arabian FM Prince Saud al-Faisal, Syrian FM Walid Moallem, Egyptian FM Ahmad Abu el-Ghaith, Turkish PM Rajab Tayeb Erdogan, Turkish FM Ali Babajan, Bahraini FM Khalid bin Ahmad al-Khalifa, Jordanian FM Salehuddin al-Bashir, Kuwaiti FM Mohammad al-Salem al-Sabah, Omani FM Yousef bin Alawi bin Abdullah, UAE FM Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan, UN Special Envoy for the Implementation of UNSCR 1559 Terje Roed Larsen, UNIFIL Commander General Claudio Graziano, European Parliament Vice President Luisa Morgantini, and Iraqi National Assembly Speaker Mahmoud al-Mashadani representing the Arab Inter-Parliamentarian Union.

¶14. (C) A visiting CODEL led by Congressman Nick Rahall (D-WV) and comprised of three Congressmen of Lebanese descent (Rahall, Darrell Issa (R-CA), and Ray Lahood (D-IL) plus three other members (Charlie Melancon (D-LA), John Linder (R-GA) and Jack Kingston (R-GA) and Charge Sison represented the United States at the ceremony.

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

¶15. (C) Following the election, Speaker Berri hosted a dinner in honor of the Qatari Emir at the Biel convention center, where Patchi chocolates were placed at each plate with the words "Thank you Qatar" inscribed on the wrapping. While many of the foreign dignitaries had departed, the Lebanese were out in full force. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt created great consternation at the Charge's dinner table when he walked across the room to greet FM Mottaki. Surete General Gen. Jezzine told the Charge, "This is how it starts. Remember this moment. Walid is moving toward Hizballah." Jumblatt later pooh-poohed the encounter, telling the Charge FM Mottaki did not even know who Jumblatt was. Another guest at the dinner joked that it was too bad alcohol was not involved, as only then would it become clear what new alliances were forming, when embraces and hugs were observed.

LEBANON CELEBRATES

¶16. (U) Celebratory shots were fired into the air and

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fireworks lit up the sky as crowds of jubilant people poured into the streets of Beirut and Sleiman's hometown Amchit. Press reported that five individuals were injured by celebratory stray bullets.

SLEIMAN'S NEXT STEPS

¶17. (C) Sleiman arrived at Baabda Palace, the president's residence, at noon on May 26. According to press reports, his first official visitor was Iranian FM Mottaki. Sleiman's first official engagement as Lebanon's president will be a tour of Arab states, including Qatar, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE. Sleiman will begin consulting with parliamentarian blocs on May 27 to determine who will be the next prime minister. (Note: The government automatically is considered resigned and reverts to caretaker status upon the election of a president. Current predictions are that Siniora will stay on as Prime Minister, though Future MP Bahia Hariri, sister of Rafik, told Charge on May 26 that she was urging Saad to take the job. End note.)

A HISTORIC MOMENT, BIG CHALLENGES AHEAD

¶18. (C) The May 25 election of Michel Sleiman represents a historic moment for Lebanon. Two of Lebanon's former presidents, Amine Gemayel and Emile Lahoud, observed the

proceedings from the parliament's gallery. Sleiman is the twelfth president since independence, and more importantly, the first president to be elected since the withdrawal of the Syrian Army in April 2005.

¶19. (C) Lebanon must not resolve key remaining issues that led to the political crisis, namely dealing with Hizballah arms, implementing the 1989 Taif agreement, and establishing a fair and transparent electoral law that would further democratic representation in Lebanon. While the election is a bright moment that should be celebrated, it needs to be put in perspective. The unresolved issues of the past still present the greatest danger for Lebanon.

SISON